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ABSTRACT

When it comes to teaching students how to correct errors in mechanics and usage, English composition teachers have a problem in determining what and how to teach. An approach is developing overseas which comes from a type of linguistics called "functional," because it describes how languages work rather than only its forms. A branch that has evolved to serve education is Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). It has a well developed theory with applications ranging from teaching second languages to generating language on computers. Five concepts from this approach which can be applied to teaching are: (1) multiplicity of purposes, (2) influence of context on patterns of content and language, (3) relation of grammar to meaning, (4) flow of information, and (5) differences between writing and speech that influence punctuation as well as wording. SFL helps teachers to relate grammatical structures to meaning rather than to forms. Interest in pedagogical application of SFL is increasing, but it is not yet well known in North America. Its examples and technical jargon are foreign and confusing. Because application in Australia began with the lower grades, the pedagogy and parts of the theory relevant to college teaching have not yet been fully developed and publicized, although there is progress. To apply SFL to teaching composition, for example, a teacher might help a student outside of class with a draft in a useful little genre: a letter applying for a grant from a charitable foundation with North American ideology and culture. (Contains 13 references.) (CR)

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A Functional Approach to Composition Offers an Alternative

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Carolyn G. Hartnett

When it comes to teaching students how to correct errors in mechanics and usage, English composition teachers have a problem determining what and how to teach. If they diligently teach grammar and punctuation by rules and teach spelling and vocabulary by lists to memorize, the intellectual work has some merit, but little of the effort transfers to writing. If teachers assign exercises made up of lists of sentences with someone else's errors to be corrected, the sentences lack a context for meaning and are therefore literally meaningless; students may try to guess, but they have no understanding or motivation to do so. If teachers mark errors in the margins of students' own work and require corrections, writing becomes an error avoidance exercise instead of an attempt to communicate. If teachers focus only on the processes of writing and say that students can easily pick up the details of editing later, later never comes—unless it comes in another course where the instructor faces the same dilemmas. If the teacher learned standard English from extensive reading and home environment and expects students to do the same, students without that background are lost.

In despair, the teacher may wonder why only North American students have to study their native language in college. There must be an alternative approach, one more concerned with meaning than rules, one that can explicate what environment and reading experience teach effortlessly, one that enables students to transcend their background. If we are willing to look abroad, such an approach is developing overseas. It includes concepts that people like Noguchi, Kolln, and Vande Kopple already apply.

The approach comes from a type of linguistics called functional because it describes how languages work rather than only its forms. A branch that evolved to serve education is Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). It has a well developed theory with applications ranging from teaching second languages to generating language on computers. It is based on intensive study of real language of individuals. It is still developing, and adherents argue with each other, but well-trained practitioners are enthusiastic. We can select from it what can make teaching more effective for us. To demonstrate its potential, let's consider five concepts from this approach and apply them to an example of teaching. The concepts are the multiplicity of purposes, the influence of context on patterns of content and language, the relation of grammar to meaning, the flow of information, and the differences between writing and speech that influence punctuation as well as wording.

The multiplicity of purposes

Handbooks for first-year college composition courses typically begin with a perfunctory section on purposes for writing; the best consider audience. Purpose depends on the particular situation within a culture. SFL often illustrates this dependency by drawing a series of circles within larger circles. The outer ones represent the context of culture and ideology, which influence why, how, and what someone might want to communicate. The contexts of culture and ideology then influence what is represented in the inner circles: settings that involve the users of language, their assumptions and goals, their relationships with one another, and their meanings. These in turn influence the choices of vocabulary in grammatical structures and, in the innermost circle, the physical expression of the words, their forms, and their order.

In this way, Systemic Functional Linguistics recognizes that people communicate for more than one reason. They do more than express ideas; sometimes they talk just for sociability. Michael Halliday, the instigator of SFL, observed that a baby's early communications are not to inform but to persuade: bring me water, or pick me up. Later, as children begin expressing thoughts in real language, their language shapes and then becomes their thought, and forever after language and thought are difficult to separate. People use language to make meaning. They also realize that to fit into society they need to create certain types of texts, such as jokes, apologies, applications, accident reports, advertising, recipes, or essays in a form carefully taught by a teacher. Language accomplishes what SFL calls three *metafunctions* of language: to express ideas, to enact social relations, and to create specific discourses or texts. To some extent, every communication does all three. They influence choices of content and its form.

Functional linguistics theory also includes sociolinguistics. When SFL analysts discuss Ebonics, for instance, they take into account the ideology, culture, and social context where Ebonics occurs. As in any analysis, they consider not only the setting but also the social relationships of the communicators: how close they are in status, how well they know each other, their roles in the situation, and their purposes for communicating. This information is essential for understanding the recent controversies.

The pervasive influence of context on patterns of content, vocabulary, and grammar

The specific current situation, i.e., the context, determines the appropriate type of language. Relevant factors include the field or subject matter involved, the relationships between the speaker and listener or reader and writer, their purposes, and the media and type of text. Some situations are repeated and become common, so that

people get used to meeting a certain combination of information and language there. Eventually, the people expect it and are disappointed if it is not present. After the context is recognized, the expectations for content, its organization, the vocabulary, and appropriate grammatical choices can be described explicitly and then taught. For example, the short story genre has setting, characters, a sequence of events, past tense, and usually third person indicative, among other features.

The term *genre* has now expanded and become a buzzword in journals like *College Composition and Communication*. In SFL, *genres* are social acts with appropriate content and form to achieve their purposes. The description of a genre specifies the content, its organization, the participants in certain roles and degrees of intimacy and social status, and the appropriate syntactic and lexical choices, such as the types of verbs and conjunctions, the tenses, and the expected vocabulary with its variations and appropriate jargon, voice, tone, style, and politeness formulas. For example, research on the explanations required in science courses in Australian schools revealed the structure of the content expected and these grammatical features: "Focus on generic, non-human participants. Use of simple present tense. Use of temporal and causal conjunctive relations. Use of mainly material (action) processes [verbs], some passives used to get theme right" (Cope 240-41).

The requirements of genres can seem obvious, but only to persons who already know the culture. When the requirements are taught explicitly, students without a wide background in reading can learn them. A genre analysis looks like a formula, but it gives students who need it a way of catching up. They cannot succeed without it.

The relation of grammar to meaning

Genre is expressed with grammar and vocabulary. Sentences use appropriate words for what SFL calls *participants, processes, and circumstances*, which we can relate to traditional grammar. Participants appear in noun phrases used as subjects or objects, which can be further described, when necessary, according to their functional roles as actor, goal, recipient, agent, identifier, carrier, range, and such. Processes are expressed by verbs. Circumstances have the grammatical forms of adverbs, prepositional phrases, and subordinate clauses.

SFL helps teachers to relate grammatical structures to meaning rather than to forms. For example, Rei Noguchi advocates a shortcut that enables students to identify subject and verb of a statement. This method of identifying—not defining, but identifying—the subject and verb is to use the conversational device of tag questions (Halliday 73). They refer to the core of the statement they follow, *don't they?* Students find the referent of the last word of the tag (the pronoun) and identify it as the subject; whatever the first word refers to is the verb, the predicate. In practical application, to edit a fragment students add enough information to the sentence to enable them to create a tag question, or they attach the fragment to something that can be tagged (Hartnett, *Probing*). When more than one tag question is possible, students can either separate the clauses they refer to or make certain they are properly attached.

SFL also recognizes the power of verbs. Their position in a sentence determines whether it is a statement, a question, or a command. SFL classifies verbs according to their meaning and then describes grammatical differences that parallel the semantic differences. Speakers of other languages learn these distinctions more efficiently as meaningful patterns than as separate vocabulary. For example, verbs with the prototypical meanings of *doing, acting,* and *behaving* use the progressive form for current action (*is doing, are behaving*), but verbs of mental and verbal operations such as *thinking, sensing,* and *saying*, use the simple present form for current action (*thinks, says*). The sensing verbs often couple with an etymologically unrelated verb so that the subject can be either the senser or the source: *She likes the music. The music pleases her.* Some of the thinking and saying type can grammatically add an additional complete sentence: *She says the music pleases her.* The third type of verbs identifies something that exists, perhaps with certain characteristics or in certain relations: *being, having*, and *relating*; it is useful for describing (Hartnett, "Flow"). Different types of verbs predominate in different types of writing, for grammar is part of genre.

The flow of information

Much of Kolln's chapter entitled "Rhetorical Grammar" concerns word order and the flow of information. English word order indicates grammatical structure and creates a flow of information. Since English nouns do not have inflections for case, word order has become the primary syntactic signal. Rearranging *The bear chased a tourist* to *The tourist chased a bear* changes both the meaning and the orientation of the sentence. An account of a tourist's experience starts with the tourist as subject, justifying a passive verb form if necessary. This example illustrates another principle of word order: sentences move from what the reader already knows or can easily understand to a newsworthy point at the end. What comes last in the sentence is most memorable; it is prominent in the reader's mind and ready for further development. The principle of end focus allows deeper development in the next sentence and motivates distinctive ("marked") rearrangements, such as *Music she likes, but reading she hates*. It has already made its way into some of our handbooks and many advanced texts on style and technical writing.

To learn to control the order of information, students can trace the beginnings of sentences. Patterns of sentence beginnings relate to the genre, and when a segment of text has a single method of development, the beginnings of sentences reflect it (Fries). For example, in chronological development, sentences may begin with indication of time, but in a travel guide, locations lead. Understanding the function of the beginnings of sentences is more useful to writers than blindly following a rule to vary sentence beginnings without regard to meaning or ease of reading.

English provides a wide array of other rearrangement techniques, such as choice of verb and passive voice (Hartnett, "English"). An advanced technique that all college students need is the use of nouns for appropriate generalizations, instead of verbs or adjectives. (The previous sentence could have employed more verbs: *Students who have advanced may write with more nouns that appropriately generalize what people do*.... The extra verbs require adding subjects and tenses that in this case are all vague or obvious.) Generalizing with nouns is a characteristic of intellectually mature writing: it can evaluate and show the significance of details. It develops from necessity when science moves from reporting occur-

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rences to classifying them. Now it has become the hallmark of bureaucratic writing and is often overused to evade responsibility by not naming the actor. Students benefit further when they critically resist excessive or manipulative nominalization yet express themselves with maturity in appropriate nominalizations (nouns that do not name any person, place, or concrete thing). If students do not develop a nominalized style from extensive reading, they must learn it from explicit teaching.

The differences between writing and speech

Writers who want to be taken seriously must meet the expectations of their readers who, at least subconsciously, expect differences in speech and writing. One characteristic of writing is that it must be complete enough to stand alone in the absence of the writer to expand or answer questions. When students become aware of this difference, they realize they must give their written ideas full development. That development requires repetitions, transitions, and other devices for *cohesion* (Halliday and Hasan). It merited a separate textbook by Vande Kopple and is probably the concept from SFL that has made the greatest inroads in our composition handbooks as a whole.

Written sentences also have a higher proportion of content terms and a more predictable grammatical structure. In certain contexts, readers expect what has been called Edited Standard English. Some of their expectations, like much subject-verb agreement and capitalization, are more conventional than informative, but they affect how the reader perceives the writer's competence in the field and status within the group. Readers expect Edited Standard English because it is comfortable, frequently used, more universal, and associated with success. Other varieties carry connotations that some readers may consider undesirable. Our culture has made a few of the mechanical conventions significant gatekeepers.

Many people do not understand all the implications of an obvious distinctive characteristic of writing: that it is seen, not heard, and the visual and aural systems are not parallel. Although SFL is still developing specific pedagogies, individual teachers are already making applications for spelling and punctuation. Functional teachers can point out that spelling and punctuation do not represent sound, but substitute for it. Punctuation is based on grammatical structures, not on the pace of speech. A period marks the end of a grammatical structure, not the completion of a thought that, for an adult, may require a whole book to explain. Speakers can pause whenever they wish: to regain the attention of the audience, to create emphasis, or just to think of the next word. When speakers have more to say or suspect they may be interrupted, they often rush on with a succeeding sentence, without pause. Visually, comma splices and run-on sentences reduce the number of places for focus at the ends of sentences and thus decrease their effectiveness.

Commas serve a structural function, setting off parts of a sentence that are relevant but optional or at least movable. Some teachers generalize that commas set off optional or movable additions to the main idea of the sentence (Uehling). This simplification works with lists unless the list is designated as both comprehensive and ordered. It resolves most questions about commas and eliminates having to teach many otherwise unnecessary distinctions.

An application

To apply SFL to teaching composition, consider a teacher helping a good student outside of class with a draft in a useful little genre: a letter applying for a grant from a charitable foundation with North American ideology and culture. According to the cultural assumptions, superior achievement should be encouraged and rewarded, opportunities should be equal, and freedom and justice are valued. The foundation may have also some political, social, economic, or religious goals that applicants ought to be aware of and express identity with, if possible. Applicants must not offend. In the office, teacher and student discuss the values of the readers.

The social context involves the applicant—perhaps a young, inexperienced student—and an unknown reader who is probably older, more experienced, and of a higher social status. The reader handles many requests and is well aware of the costs and requirements for academic success. The reader does not know anything about the many applicants but expects to learn of their goals, accomplishments, and current resources. The medium in this case is a formal business letter. It either refers to an attached transcript of grades and honors or summarizes this information, adding where and when the grades were earned. The applicant reinforces the impression of academic success by using Edited Standard English.

The functional teacher can go further by helping the student review the ends of sentences to recognize an outline of the content, see the flow of information, and determine whether the draft meets the needs of the reader. Applicants need to tell about themselves directly, so it is appropriate to begin a sentence with *I* or *My*. When the applicants discuss their goals, however, they name the area of interest, and subsequent sentences might begin with references to that area or its parts or requirements. Such a discussion could display the applicant's knowledge of the topic and enthusiasm for it, a great advantage. If sentences were to begin with words like *Tuition* or *The cost of books and housing* and end with specific or evaluative data, the reader learns little new and may set the application aside, regardless of its flawless subject-verb agreement.

If the scholarship application has sentence structure problems, it won't help much to repeat traditional teaching of definitions of eight parts of speech and grammatical structures or to state rules and identify decontextualized examples. The student worries about errors in the sentence, *I expected to win the state debate tournament, but the meet was called off* because of traditional rules against beginning with *I*, using passive verbs, ending with prepositions, and using nouns as adjectives (*state* and *debate*) or verbs as nouns (*meet*). The SFL teacher can calm the student's fears, showing why the structures in this sentence are useful, looking at function in the sentence, what words do for the meaning, rather than identifying them first as a part of speech. The part of speech assigned depends on the use or function within the sentence. Considering function also avoids teaching unnecessary distinctions between various forms that have the same role in the structure.

Interest in pedagogical applications of SFL is increasing, but it is not well known for several reasons. Its examples and technical jargon are foreign and confusing; practitioners in other parts of the English-speaking world define terms like *theme* and *clause* differently. Because the application in Australia began with the lower grades, the pedagogy and parts of the theory relevant to our college

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teaching have not yet been fully developed and publicized, although there is progress (Butt). Teachers need training, a slow and difficult task. Authors of our own handbooks admit that they use ineffective and outdated approaches because overworked and part-time instructors prefer what is familiar (Keene).

Politically, Systemic Functional Linguistics decreases the advantages of social class. Since it explicates what naturally good readers have absorbed unconsciously, it makes possible the explicit teaching of written styles that are new to some students. Methods of doing this explicit teaching will be perfected only if we work at them with our own kinds of students, through trial and error if necessary. Vande Kopple's 1989 textbook provides a start and excellent bibliographies. The alternative handbook I am trying to write an for my first-year composition students needs revision each semester (Hartnett *Probing)*. Exploring SFL and developing new teaching techniques are not easy, but they seem worthwhile.

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